

Introduction

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As students, we continually hear that the future of the environment and the environmental movement is in our hands. We are told that we must help solve a series of complex environmental problems – including climate change, energy consumption, water scarcity, toxic contamination, air pollution, sprawl, and the accelerated loss of plant and animal species – where local, daily decisions can have global, long-term implications. We are challenged to devise innovative strategies to build coalitions and educate businesses, communities, and governments about environmental issues and the need to take action. We are reminded that the last generation of environmentalists didn't make sufficient progress addressing some of these more intricate environmental problems. We are cautioned that if we don't act now our children and our children's children will pay the price.

Stepping up to the challenge of educating the public about the significant environmental issues that lie ahead and inciting action is not an easy mandate. In fact, at times, we find the challenge almost insurmountable. Issues such as those outlined above aren't going to solve themselves; indeed, the solutions are long-term, and will require local, national, and global coordinated efforts to address them effectively. But clearly, our generation must rise to the challenge if the future of our planet and its inhabitants is to improve. As the Jewish philosopher Hillel once said: "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? *And if not now, when?*"

In working toward a cleaner, brighter and more sustainable future, one avenue that environmentalists rarely employ as a means of promoting change is politics. Even among our fellow students, we have observed a sense of indifference toward the political process and a profound skepticism as to whether our political leaders can help facilitate positive change. Although engaged in environmental science, policy, and advocacy, many young environmentalists are fed up with what they see as a government that values corporate interests over social and environmental concerns, and many have lost the motivation to even exercise their right to vote.

How did this happen? How is it that this generation of environmentalists, in contrast to the generation before us that helped shape many of our environmental laws and policies, has come to view politics with indifference and even disdain?

In light of this trend, it seems appropriate to ask some hard questions about politics and the environment:

- How has this gap between the public, politics, and the environment emerged?
- Do politicians and politics affect the environment in ways that warrant change?
- Will environmental issues affect the upcoming presidential election and can the election serve as a means to change current environmental policies?
- How can we get involved?

To investigate these questions, we decided to convene a seminar series to engage our speakers and our fellow students in a focused conversation regarding these issues. We decided to compile this book to expand that conversation, to share with others the lessons we learned from the dialogue, and to encourage those involved in the political process – and those who are not yet engaged – to see how the future of our environment might be shaped by the 2004 presidential election.

REFLECTING ON POLLING DATA: ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

As we began to plan this series and the book to follow, one of the first – and arguably most important – questions became: what is the present state of public opinion on environmental issues in U.S. politics, and how are these issues playing out in the 2004 presidential race? After reviewing piles of polling data, we recognized that the American public cares about the environment – polls routinely find that more than 70 percent of Americans consider themselves environmentalists.¹

¹ In a May 2004 poll conducted by the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, 73 percent of respondents rated the environment as the “most important” or “very important” issue to them personally. Again, in an April 2004 poll conducted by The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land, 73 percent of respondents considered themselves “environmentalists.”

However, only one percent of voters continually cite the environment as the principal issue in their voting decisions.²

These two sets of statistics seem to paint a contradictory picture of environmental issues in American politics. Americans clearly want clean air, clean water, and wild places. But since they aren't necessarily deciding whom to vote for based on the candidates' environmental records, what is it that is affecting their voting behavior? The obvious answer is that Americans care more about other pressing concerns such as jobs, national security, health care, or education. We, however, weren't willing to accept such a ready response. We wanted to further explore ways that environmental issues – about which many Americans care deeply – factor into voting decisions, even if they are not the primary determinants of voting behavior.

THE GREAT DIVIDE: ENVIRONMENT AS A PARTISAN ISSUE

One thing is certain when analyzing the role of the environment in U.S. politics today: for the most part, the public perceives the environment as a Democratic issue. Many contributors to our project point out, however, that this wasn't always the case.

From our perspective, this partisan divide is detrimental to our political system and unhealthy for the future of the environmental movement. If the environmental community intends to move forward in strengthening our environmental protections, they must do so through a non-partisan commitment to address them. After all, many of the laws and policies that provide the foundation for protecting our environment today were forged in this manner – with a Democratic Congress and a Republican president, Richard Nixon, leading the effort.

The current political cooperation between environmentalists and Democrats raised several important questions in our minds:

- Why have Republicans largely relinquished their association with environmental concerns?

² On February 23, 2003, when asked by Fox News “What do you think are the two most important issues for the federal government to address?” only one percent identified the environment as being in the top two priorities, ranking below 13 other national issues. Again, when asked the same question in a Harris Interactive poll administered on February 12, 2003, only one percent identified the environment as a key issue.

- Have environmentalists alienated the Republican Party, or have Republicans themselves turned away from environmental problems?
- What can be done to encourage a return to the non-partisan approach to dealing with environmental issues that led to the environmental progress of the late 1960s and early 1970s?

Our intention in asking these questions extends beyond the 2004 presidential election; rather, our ultimate goal is to better understand the future role of the environment in U.S. politics.

DEVISING A NEW STRATEGY

Environmentalists have struggled in recent years to reach new constituents and to motivate these individuals to take political action. Throughout this book, our contributors seek to understand how we should better communicate environmental issues to the voters that “count” (i.e., those enigmatic swing voters that each party is trying to influence during this election year). Should our political strategy be focused on promoting “the environment” as broadly defined, or should it focus on specific environmental issues or messages that impact people’s day-to-day lives? Are national political strategies more important than local or regional political engagement? How do swing voters perceive the environmental movement? Although each speaker presented a broad range of responses to these questions, several overarching themes emerged that are highlighted in the book’s final chapter.

BOOK PARTICIPANTS

We invited a diverse group of individuals, representing both Republican and Democratic perspectives, and a wide array of experiences and disciplines, to participate in our project. They were asked to provide historical and current perspectives on the role of the environment in U.S. politics, and to explain, in their own words, the interplay between the environment and politics, especially as it might affect the 2004 presidential election. We hoped to learn from their experiences, to gain from their insights, and to share in their successes and failures as we attempted to address the questions before us.

The insights and experiences of former elected officials, political appointees, and strategic thinkers are essential in exploring the issue of politics and the environment. Our series began with an overview by Daniel R. Glickman, a former Democratic member of Congress, Secretary of Agriculture under President Clinton, and, at the time of his lecture, Director of the Harvard Institute of Politics. Congressman Christopher Shays, a Republican member of the House of Representatives, offered his current perspectives on the state of environmental politics on Capitol Hill, and Chris Henick, former Deputy Assistant to President George W. Bush, provided an insider's perspective on the Bush administration's environmental record. An historical perspective on the role of an administrative branch executive in the Nixon and Ford administrations was offered by Nathaniel P. Reed, former Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks in the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Additionally, we were pleased to benefit from the insights of John Podesta, former Chief of Staff to President Clinton. In fact, it was John Podesta who offered one of the more provocative observations of the seminar series when he responded to a question about the 2000 presidential election by noting that the environment may have cost Al Gore the 2000 election. This observation sparked much discussion and subsequent debate. Of course, it also helped to set the stage for former Vice President Al Gore's later participation in the series.

No political analysis or strategic political thinking is complete without the participation of pollsters. Pollsters observe general patterns in voter behavior, analyze why voters make the decisions they do, and distill the messages and strategies that work. We invited Democratic and Republican pollsters to explain how the environment is affecting the 2004 election and to highlight the key environmental messages that resonate with voters. The two pollsters included Chris Marshall, Senior Analyst at the Mellman Group (the primary polling agency for John Kerry's presidential campaign), and Kellyanne Conway, CEO and President of the polling company, inc./WomanTrend, who works primarily with Republican candidates.

Much of America learns about environmental issues by reading a news article or listening to a local environmental story on the evening news. The media exerts rare power over our perceptions of people, places, and the issues they represent. In this way, the media strongly influences what we know and how much we understand. We invited

two environmental journalists, Eric Pianin from the *Washington Post*, and Elizabeth Shogren from the *Los Angeles Times*, to explain their roles as environmental reporters at major national newspapers. We also invited Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Robert B. Semple, Jr. to discuss his extensive experience writing about environmental issues as a Senior Editor at the *New York Times*.

Nonprofit political advocacy groups play an instrumental role in the way environmental issues play out in the political sphere. They organize and motivate the grassroots, bolster support for candidates with strong environmental records, and advocate on behalf of strong environmental policies. They are the lifeblood of the environmental movement. Deb Callahan, President of the League of Conservation Voters, was invited to discuss the on-the-ground, grassroots political activities that are dominating the environmental strategy in the 2004 election. Jim DiPeso, Policy Director of Republicans for Environmental Protection (REP America), was asked to discuss his role as an environmental advocate and a stalwart Republican. Finally, Robert Kennedy Jr., the President of Waterkeeper Alliance, Chief Prosecuting Attorney at Riverkeeper, and Senior Attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, closed the series with a sharp critique of the Bush administration's environmental policies and a vision for the future of environmental politics.

Every speaker in the lecture series has a chapter in our book. Their talks were edited to highlight their major points and the most interesting of their interactions with students in the course are included in a Q & A section at the end of each chapter. Together, we believe these edited talks and Q & A sessions give the reader the full picture of what was presented in the series, as well as offering the insights and reflections of the organizers of the course in this introduction and the book's conclusion.

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The contributors to this volume – the speakers in our lecture series at Yale – deserve our utmost thanks. They accepted our invitation with great generosity. Not one asked for an honorarium. We are deeply in their debt and honored that, through this book, they have allowed us to share their insights and ideas with people far beyond our classroom at Yale. They have given us, and we hope you, a measure of hope for the future of environmental politics in America.
